“Against Shameless and Systematic Calumny”

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Strategies of Domination and Resistance and their Impact on the Bodies of the Poor in 19th-Century Ireland

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IRELAND IN THE 19TH CENTURY: POVERTY, FAMINE, AND THE PERCEPTION OF RACE AND CLASS

Ireland became a constituent part of the United Kingdom through the Act of Union in 1801. Access to land ownership (and wealth) was highly biased toward the Anglo-Irish ascendancy while the labouring classes suffered from extreme levels of poverty. Poverty and social class was also expressed in terms of diet and food access where the the potato was more or less the only crop for the poor. This made the population very vulnerable to crop failures, such as the result of a potato blight during the notorious Great Irish Famine between 1845–52. Approximately one million people died during this period.

Throughout the 19th century, the Irish were caricatured in the British and American press as morally and socially inferior. While this perception was rooted in the idea of race, it also had a strong class dimension. This denigration of the population of Ireland in general, and that of the Irish poor (primarily Catholic) in particular, did not go uncontested. An example of this is the 1899 publication by the Irish-language scholar and historian Edmund Hogan (1831–1917) entitled *The Irish People: Their Height, Form, and Strength*, which he wrote in order to defend his own people “against shameless and systematic calumny.”

RECOVERING IDENTITY: A BIOARCHAEOLOGY OF SOCIAL MARGINALISATION

Despite the fact that Ireland was constitutionally integrated into the United Kingdom from 1801, other aspects of the British-Irish relationship was one of colonial master and subject. The unequal relationship between the two islands and unequal social relations within Ireland were legitimized and sustained by narratives of racial distinctiveness and inferiority. These narratives of difference included myths about the Irish supposed innate violence, their physical built and their use of tobacco.

BURIALS OF THE POOR AND MARGINALIZED

KILKENNY UNION WORKHOUSE

The workhouse in Kilkenny City opened in April 1842, and was designed to provide relief for a maximum of 1,300 inmates. Mass deaths occurred in the institution due to infectious disease, an aggrevated by overcrowded conditions, during the Famine when an estimated over 4,100 people died in the institution. Nearly 1,000 individuals were interred in an intramural mass burial ground between 1847–51, which was excavated in 2006. It comprised of 63 mass burial pits, in which the dead had been buried in coffins stacked on top of each other (Geber 2015).

Kilkenny Union Workhouse. Photo: Courtesy of Karyn Deegan, via Kilkenny County Library.

SPIKE ISLAND PRISON

The male convict depot on Spike Island in Cork harbor received its first prisoners in October 1847. A total of just under 1,200 men are recorded as having died in the prison between 1847 and 1883. Over 80% of these deaths occurred between 1850 and 1854 and were interred in a cemetery on the east side of the island (McCarthy & O’Donnabhain 2016). A new convict graveyard (c. 1860–83) was established at the western end of the island and contains the remains of about 150 men. Recent excavations of 26 graves in this cemetery revealed a regimented series of graves that were mostly of uniform depth and distance apart.

Spike Island. Photo: Courtesy of Con Brogan, National Monuments Service.

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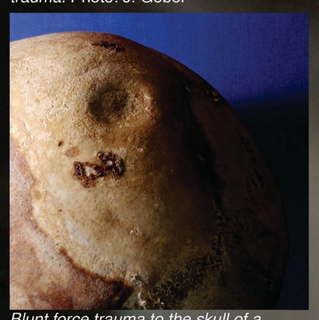
THE FIGHTING IRISH? CULTURAL PATTERNS OF VIOLENCE

A frequent theme in the stereotyping of the Irish was to ascribe drunkenness and violence to that group. Violence as a feature of Irish culture was frequently depicted in xenophobic caricatures in the press. The frequent use of the *shillelagh* (a wooden walking stick, traditionally made from blackthorn) in fights throughout the 19th century in Ireland resulted in this particular style of fighting becoming associated with Irish combatants and is a common theme in their representation. The possible use of *shillelagh* in Kilkenny is evidenced from the frequency of cranial blunt force trauma, which was present in both males (12/190; 6.3%) and females (9/175; 5.1%).

Evidence of inter-personal violence is ubiquitous in the bioarchaeological record and cultural practices contribute to determining the patterns of interpersonal violence in archaeological skeletal materials. When comparing Irish (Kilkenny Union Workhouse and Spike Island) and English (St Martin-in-the-Bull-Ring, Birmingham) 19th century bioarchaeological samples, violence was expressed differently on a cultural basis, and that there is nothing to suggest that there would have been a substantially different exposure to violence between these societies.

Male skull from Kilkenny Union Workhouse, with evidence of blunt force trauma. Photo: J. Geber



Blunt force trauma to the skull of a female from Kilkenny Union Workhouse. Photo: J. Geber

“NO DEGRADED DWARFS”

Height as a physical characteristic of people and “race” was of particular interest in the 19th century. A commonly held opinion was that the Irish were a degenerative people, comprising of “pot-bellied, bow-legged, abortively-featured” individuals of “five feet two upon an average” in height. A comparison of osteometric data between English (London) and Irish (Kilkenny and Spike Island) 19th-century skeletons have shown that the pooled English (n=263) and Irish (n=274) samples were not significantly different nor were there differences in terms of robusticity.

FEMUR BONE LENGTHS (MM) FROM IRISH AND ENGLISH SKELETAL SAMPLES

	Males					Females				
Sample	N	min.	max.	mean	SD	N	min.	max.	mean	SD
Kilkenny Union Workhouse, 1847–1851	133	388.0	507.0	455.0	24.4	124.0	372.5	475.0	419.5	21.3
Spike Island Prison, ca. 1860–1883	17	410.0	502.0	445.5	19.2	-	-	-	-	-
London, England, 18–19th century[1]	147	395.0	513.0	451.6	24.9	116.0	355.0	468.0	421.0	22.1

[1]This sample comprise of collated data from the following post-medieval cemeteries: St. Bride’s Lower (1770–1849), Chelsea Old Church (18th to 19th century), and Crossbones (1800–1853) (WORD Database 2016).

PIPE SMOKING – IDENTITY AND SOCIAL RESISTANCE

Clay-pipe smoking was a common practice in the 19th century (Goodman 1994), but in Ireland the habit had different cultural connotations, which in a way explain how it eventually formed a stereotypical Irish attribute. In Kilkenny, 61% (101/165) of all males, and 29% (41/142) of all females had such facets. Among the exclusively male convicts at Spike Island, the percentage with pipe-smoking notches was 77.3% (17/22). These rates are substantially higher than in contemporary skeletal samples from England.

In the context of colonial domination, the habit of pipe smoking in Ireland can be viewed as a political act relating to social and national identity. In this view, smoking was a form of resistance and could be viewed in terms of a material expression of anticolonial discourse. This took the shape of not only the habit of smoking, but also the pipe itself that would often be adorned with nationalist imagery.

Clay-pipe facet in the dentition of a male from Kilkenny Union Workhouse. Photo: J. Geber

Examples of Irish clay-pipes with nationalist imagery; the Irish shamrock (left) and harp (right). Photo: https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/808854

Background photo: Stephen Bean, University College Cork.